

At a loss for what to do? Camping opportunities galore

by Nick Longobardi



Many campsites on the Refuge include picnic tables and fire pits for campers to utilize during their stay. These sites at Upper Skilak await campers this weekend! Photo credit Nick Longobardi/USFWS.

Whether you enjoy lounging around listening to a babbling creek in Upper Skilak Campground, watching a colony of beavers collect logs for their lodge on Hidden Lake, or reeling in the biggest fish of your life out on Skilak Lake, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge campgrounds can provide all of your recreational needs.

In an area saturated with camping opportunities, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge grants a unique opportunity for all of us to experience the Kenai Peninsula's grand beauty. The Refuge contains many smaller (and free!) campgrounds including Watson Lake, Kelly Lake, Engineer Lake, Rainbow Lake, and Dolly Varden Lake. In addition, it also houses two larger campgrounds at Hidden Lake and Upper Skilak Lake where you will never pay any more than \$10 a night.

The Refuge is a very unique place due to the fact

that it is one of the few National Wildlife Refuges to have an abundance of developed campgrounds, giving us a chance to really get one-on-one with Mother Nature. There are over 130 campsites on the Refuge, not even counting the remote sites in the Swanson River and Swan Lake Canoe Systems. Campsites are very popular and fill quickly on summer weekends, but during week nights there is plenty of space for everyone.

Each of our developed campgrounds has pit latrines which are checked and cleaned periodically throughout the week by our ranger and maintenance staff. Each campground has a boat access with large launches for trailered boats on the bigger lakes such as Hidden Lake, Skilak Lake, and Dolly Varden Lake, or lake access for kayaks and canoes at Engineer Lake, Lower Ohmer Lake, and Petersen Lake. These water experiences make it easy to interface with nature, not to mention the countless nearby hiking trails. What-

ever your camping style may be, it's available here on the Refuge.

But perhaps the best part of the campgrounds is that even with all of these amenities, you don't have to sacrifice your wildlife experience. As a ranger who has worked and recreated in these campgrounds, I've seen no shortage of amazing things.

For instance, I was kayaking on Hidden Lake one evening when I spotted a large figure swimming in the water. It was too large to be a beaver, so I moved in for a better look. As I paddled closer I was able to see that it was actually a black bear swimming across the lake. I watched it climb out on shore, look at me and drip dry for a few seconds before it climbed up the mountain.

Another time, I was out on patrol in Upper Skilak when I spotted something behind the tall grass. It was a lynx on the hunt for some voles, crouched and ready to pounce. It caught me looking at it for a few moments then wandered into the brush.

So please, come enjoy the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and all it has to offer. Stay for a day or a week, and create your own memories, as I and millions of

others have over the years. There is no telling what you will find or see when you visit.

Nick Longobardi is in his second season as a Park Ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Find more information at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.



A beautiful postcard shot of the boat launch at the Upper Skilak Campground, one of many lakes with boat trailer access on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Photo Credit Nick Longobardi/USFWS.